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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest examines: (1) research related to the teaching and learning of history in elementary schools; (2) purposes of education in history; and (3) teaching practices to develop interest in and knowledge of history among students in elementary schools. Levstik (1986) stated that social studies educators should apply the techniques of "response to literature research" to history learning and explore the power of narrative in history. Renewed research on children's history learning ability based on schema theory, new trends in Piaget's developmental theory, the narrative approach, or other paradigms may start to provide the knowledge needed to refine and improve teaching practices. For young elementary students, an important purpose of history education is to make the past seem real, and study of the past can be used to illuminate the present. Instructional methods include: (1) using literature to enhance history instruction; (2) utilizing the sounds and images of videotapes, films, and filmstrips; and (3) using special experiences such as field trips, simulations, craft and model-building experiences, National History Day projects, and oral history projects. To aid teachers in history instruction, a list of references and ERIC resources is provided. (SM)

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TEACHING HISTORY IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

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Teaching History in the Elementary School

by John D. Hoge

Recent studies have shown that the historical knowledge of young Americans is less than most educators and citizens would desire. Students' knowledge of history has suffered because of untrained teachers, reduced course requirements, and textbook treatments that are bland and voiceless and directed more toward trivial coverage of details than to the fullness needed to bring vitality and credibility to events of the past (Sewall 1987; Cheney 1987).

Content in history is practically absent from the curriculum of grades K-3 in most elementary schools; it usually is taught in combination with content from the social sciences in grades 4-6 (Ravitch 1987). A notable exception to national curriculum patterns is the new "California Framework" (1988), which emphasizes history at all levels of the elementary school curriculum.

This ERIC Digest examines (1) research related to the teaching and learning of history in elementary schools, (2) purposes of education in history, and (3) teaching practices to develop interest in and knowledge of history among students in elementary schools.

What Does Research Tell Us about Children's Ability to Learn History? Research evidence gathered over the past twenty-five years indicates that elementary-age children are incapable of thinking formally about history. This research, conducted under the developmental theory of Jean Piaget (Hallam 1970 and Kennedy 1983), shows that even the oldest elementary students are unable to deal with the conceptual abstractions, lengthy time frames, sweeping generalities, and complex causal inferences which characterize the discipline of history. This firmly established conclusion does not indicate, however, that young children are unable to learn historical facts or use the lessons of history to explore important values and develop skills in studying, thinking, and communicating. It simply means that teachers must observe the known limitations of their students in attempting to teach history.

Zaccaria (1978) hypothesized that a limited ability to deal with time might be a cause for student difficulty in learning to "think historically." He reviewed the psychological literature on children's time perception and found that the first-grade pupil's time span for thinking about events is only a week. The span widens by the third grade to nearly a month, and by the sixth grade it is close to a year. It is not until adolescence, however, that most students become capable of dealing with the periods of time typically used in a chronological account of United States history.

Levstik (1986) notes the lack of research about the teaching and learning of history in elementary schools. She concludes that little is known about what historical content should be taught and the best methods for teaching it. There is no evidence that elementary pupils can learn to "think historically" if the model of such thinking is that of the mature, professional historian.

Kieran Egan (1982) attacks aspects of Piaget's developmental theory and advocates a literary or narrative-based approach to history instruction. Egan and his followers contend that the narrative approach works better than traditional textbook instruction because it activates emotional links to reflective thinking and places the student much closer to the participant's view of history. From this perspective, historical understanding is based on such hallmarks of literary understanding as empathizing with others and sensing causality as it operates within the unfolding events.

According to Levstik (1986) research on the teaching of history in elementary schools suggests that textbook-based teaching practices are unsuccessful in developing historical understanding as defined by either the developmental or narrative-based models. She states that social studies educators should apply the techniques of "response to literature research" to history learning and explore the power of narrative in history.

Renewed research on children's history learning ability based on schema theory, new trends in Piaget's developmental theory, the narrative approach, or other paradigms may soon start to provide the knowledge needed to refine and improve our teaching practices.

What Are Practical Purposes of Education in History in the Elementary School? The teaching and learning of history in the elementary school is less focused on building definitive knowledge or formal thinking ability than it is aimed at more immediate and attainable ends. For young elementary students, an important purpose of education in history is to make the past seem real instead of remaining an untouchable abstraction held only in adult memories or hollow textbook passages. As improved history teaching begins to make this possible, students may achieve a second purpose of building insights into their own lives and contemporary events; the past can be used to illuminate the present.

Other achievable purposes of history in the elementary school are to develop knowledge of the American heritage, recognize and place in historical context important persons of the past, and introduce and gradually build understanding of time and chronology. Of course, these purposes should be addressed carefully in terms of the cognitive limitations of elementary school students.

History instruction will help children recognize their own relationship to history, realizing that their actions and lives are a potential part of yet-to-be-written histories. Holding these as the purposes of history in the elementary school will help students develop a love and respect for history and a realistic view of its

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limitations. Only then will students be receptive to more complex and formal history lessons of the secondary schools.

What Teaching Practices Are Likely to Help Young Students Develop Knowledge and Interest in History? Much has been written over the years about the shortcomings of textbook-bound social studies instruction. Sensitive teachers are aware of the learning and motivational difficulties entailed by over reliance on a single textbook, regardless of how good it is. Nevertheless, even when the textbook is the predominate source of instruction, it is still possible to help most students enjoy and benefit from their daily lessons. Teachers who are successful with this approach take steps to accomodate the varied reading abilities of their students; they make sure that vocabulary, conceptual, and experiential foundations are laid prior to reading; and they vary their reading assignments and routines to help break the boredom of needless repetition.

History instruction can be greatly enhanced by the use of literature. There is a substantial supply of elementary level historical fiction, biographies, and special purpose reference works related to history. Teachers should work with their media center and public library to identify the titles of books which may be used to investigate the past. Such books should be displayed attractively, used frequently, and discussed as a part of the regular classroom routine.

Instruction about the past is aided by the sounds and images of videotapes, films, and filmstrips. Although overreliance on these kinds of resources is a fault, careful selection and meaningful integration with ongoing instruction can do much to enhance students' knowledge of the past.

Special experiences pump life into children's history learning. Such experiences go beyond the "staples" of the classroom instruction and include field trips to museums and historical sites, simulations, craft and model-building experiences, individualized and in-depth National History Day projects, and oral history projects. When students are properly prepared for such experiences, the depth of understanding they build more than justifies the extra effort they entail.

Field trips to museums and historical sites, for example, work best after considerable study and preparation. The more students know before entering the experience, the more they will be able to see, understand, and remember. Perhaps the best type of museum to visit is a "living" one where volunteers, dressed in clothing of the period, perform the tasks and practice the crafts of the past. Regardless of whether the museum is of the "living" or traditional variety, it is important to make advanced reservations and work closely with the resident director, museum educator, or tour guide.

In conclusion, history should be a vital part of the elementary social studies curriculum. It has much to offer students who are striving to learn about their world and develop a sense of themselves in it. Skilled teachers can use the strategies discussed here to help their students learn history and love it.

References and ERIC Resources

Following is a list of resources, including references used to prepare the Digest. Those items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system and are available in microfiche and/or paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, write EDRS, 3900 Wheeler Avenue, Alexandria, Virginia 22304 or call 1-800-227-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CIJE (*Current Index to Journals in Education*) which is available in libraries containing ERIC collections. EJ documents are not available through EDRS; however, they can be located in the journal section of most libraries using the bibliographic information provided below.

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